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ABSTRACT

While the Internet undeniably contains an enormous amount of information, community colleges should consider some key issues before joining the headlong rush toward virtual classrooms. First, information can be very difficult to find on the Internet. Although search engines, web databases, and subject directories have been developed to help users find specific information, none of these are free from "false drops," or search results that are not related to the topic due to multiple meanings for the same word. In addition, because of the rapidly increasing traffic on the Internet, long delays may be experienced, which can adversely affect classes that use Internet labs. Another problem exists with computer "hackers" and vandals who bog down computer networks and disseminate viruses to web locations throughout the world. There is also the problem of advertising on the Internet; eye-catching graphics and cartoons could lure students away from their research toward other sites. Finally, due to life-cycle budgeting for computers, upgrades for machines and software, faculty and staff training, curriculum development, and institutional liability, the Internet can become rather costly as well. (HAA)

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An Hour with the Internet Curmudgeon

by Joel Morgovsky

Paper presented at the League for Innovation in the Community College's Conference on Information Technology (Phoenix, AZ, November 13-16, 1996)

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An Hour with the Internet Curmudgeon*

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A presentation at the League For Innovation Conference on Technology,
Phoenix, Arizona, November, 1996.

Are you tired of hearing about "cyberspace?"

Does HTML sound like a birth control device to you?

Do URL, HTTP, ISDN, Java, TCP/IP, SLIP, or PPP mean anything to you?

Do you feel as though you'll scream if you listen to even one more conversation about hypertext links, baud rates or browser wars?

Is that what's bothering you, Bunky?

Well then, (marching band music) this article has been written especially for you! Stand tall and join with me as I spin a cautionary tale about the headlong rush to the Internet in community colleges. "Look before you leap" is the ancient wisdom to which I cling while contemplating a future filled with digital, virtual classrooms and instruction.

On what bases should we be critical of this great new frontier of electronic media? Let me count the ways. At least six critical concerns beg for attention and reveal the lie in the Information Superhighway metaphor. While it is certainly an enormous compendium of information, the Internet is less a highway than a diabolical maze. This road is incessantly interrupted by intersections, is cluttered with ambiguous detours, lacks even a rudimentary map, harbors villains uncounted, is pockmarked with advertising and is very expensive to ride. Let me explain.

While the Internet is rightfully heralded as a vast warehouse of information, it most assuredly is not a library. An anonymous quip overheard recently on National Public Radio speaks to this dichotomy: "Knowledge, knowledge everywhere and not a thought

to think." Consider for yourself whether there are fundamental differences between library resources and Internet resources. Take into account questions about the comparable quality of information to be found in either place. For example, how did a document arrive on the 'net and is the particular source credible? What organization, if any, stands behind the information? Is the information available in any other format (print, on-line, CD-ROM, etc)? Besides validity, there are questions about the reliability of information found in libraries and on the 'net. Will you be able to retrieve information when you want it? Will the information be there on subsequent occasions? These questions only set the stage for a much deeper examination into the quality of information on the Internet. [3]

Related to the fundamental question of the nature of information on the Internet is the matter of finding what you are looking for. "The Internet may be the world's largest library, but all of the books are piled on the floor." (also heard on National Public Radio.) Libraries are nothing if not repositories of organized, catalogued information arranged for systematic search and discovery. But the Internet is a bit like the Wild West of the 1860s where there was little law and order and hordes of people rushed into the wilderness to find their fortunes. Most went bust and never realized their dreams. It is an all too simple matter to set out onto the Web looking for gold only to become sidetracked or even lost before ever arriving at your goal.

Recognizing the problems associated with locating information on the 'Net, several businesses have been formed to meet that ubiquitous need. Search "engines" have been developed that scour the Internet in search of topics that you type into their input receptacle. Yahoo!, Excite!, Infoseek, Lycos, Alta Vista; their names radiate with newness and vigor. Not all Internet search tools are the same, however. Web databases, for example, are engines that use software "robots" that have been programmed to wander through the 'net collecting the addresses of web pages that contain the text string you've entered into their hopper. Subject directories, on the other hand, are built by hand by real people who either are part of the company's staff or users of the service who are

hired on a contract basis. Yahoo! is an example of a subject directory, Lycos of a web database. (4)

How useful each of these tools is must be determined on an individual basis; you need to test them by searching for the same topic in several engines and evaluate the different results sets. But none are free of the dreaded phenomenon of "false drops." False drops are web page listings that are collected from your search but are not what you were looking for. This often happens because the search terms used were present in the results but not in the context of your search. One way that false drops can occur, for example, is because of terms with the same spelling but more than one meaning. There are many other ways. Sifting through the web sites gathered by the search engine can lead to many intersections and detours on your search path and take many frustrating hours to complete. (4)

Is the Internet a stable platform? If you take your students to an Internet lab and log onto the World Wide Web, will you experience long delays hopping among hypertext links and downloading graphics? Each of you, I'm sure, has experienced Internet "traffic jams" at peak usage times unless you are blessed with the fastest network connections. While delays may be annoying and inconvenient during a class, some pundits predict matters are likely to get worse before they get better. Bob Metcalfe, the inventor of Ethernet and an editor at Info World Magazine is an outstanding example. He has been predicting the complete collapse of the Internet within a year. He is convinced that it is not able to handle the rapidly increasing traffic in messages, video and sound that users are demanding from today's websites. We'll have to wait and see. (1)

Traffic problems aside, give a moment's thought to the Internet's vulnerability to attack by "hackers" who delight in bogging down computer networks and by vandals who disseminate viruses to web locations throughout the world. Just this past September, a hacker disabled the Public Access Networks Corporation (Panix) in New York City for over a week with a mischievous prank. Thousands of individuals and dozens of

companies were affected. The hoodlum sent a steady stream of requests for information all of which contained false return addresses. Because the requests were flooding in so rapidly, the computers were tied up and unable to handle legitimate interactions with other computers on the network. Crash! The attack gave greater exposure to a structural problem with the Internet that security engineers and network designers know about but rarely discuss publicly. [5]

It is difficult to decide what is worse, vandalism of the type just described or the malicious planting of computer viruses on the 'net. Most of us who work with computers have experienced the devastating effects viruses can have on our networked computers and our stand-alone PCs. Who has not had a hard drive crash because of an infection from one of these pranks? An entire anti-virus industry has sprung up around this problem but still, new ones get through. The cost in lost productivity, lost work and lost tempers is high.

And then there is advertising. Does your library hang advertisements from every book stack? I don't think so. Those blinking, spinning, creeping, flashing cartoons found all over the 'net are there to distract us from our work and lure us into some company's parlor to temp us with their wares. Have you ever fallen for this gimmick? Will our students be tempted and diverted from their research on, say, "neural networks"? Thankfully, recent evidence suggests that companies are finding it hard to make money off the World Wide Web and so this practice may diminish over time. But major search sites such as Yahoo! expect to be supported more and more by advertising and, without them, finding information on the 'web would be more difficult.[2] Welcome to the rock and the hard place.

And what does all of this cost? We're talking about lots of PCs. We're talking about LANs and WANs. We're talking about high speed T1 and other connections to the 'net. We're talking about monthly service charges. Then there's life-cycle budgeting for the computers, upgrades for machines and software, faculty and staff training, curriculum

development, and the matter of "netiquette" and institutional liability. Is that what's bothering you, Bunky? Are you wondering if there's any hope of ever achieving value-added?

Will this phenomenon last? Didn't you just finish an Information Literacy project for your department 15 months ago? Wasn't it just yesterday that you volunteered to infuse your course with Writing Across the Curriculum? Diversity Awareness? Service Learning? Is it possible that just as we get all our resources together an buy into this phenomenon something new will loom up over the horizon to eclipse the current enterprise?

A recent poll by the Yankelovich Partners[6] found that the growth of online subscribers is still happening but the rate is declining compared with last year's figures. They report that there is

> "a high level of dissatisfaction [with] cyberspace. People can't find what they're looking for, and they are unsatisfied with reliability...."
>
> and
>
> "The long term viability of the medium is driven by the ability to provide people with something beyond a novelty. Otherwise it will be like a pet rock or something you get tired of and put on a shelf."

I told you so! Listen to the Internet Curmudgeon! In these times of outcomes assessment, many of us are being asked to lurch into the future with very little assessment whatsoever. Look before you leap, for heaven's sake!

If that's what's bothering you, Bunky, rise up and spread the word.

* With overt respect to Mr. Eddie Lawrence: The Old Philosopher.

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